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This article discusses trends in the occurrence of out-of-wedlock births and factors which contribute to or are associated with illegitimate pregnancies. Specifically discussed are the rates of increase of such births, particularly among unmarried teenage mothers, and the ethnic, social, and psychological characteristics of unwed mothers. It is felt that the rise in illegitimacy is "substantial but not alarming" and that out-of-wedlock births are related both to socioeconomic and racial factors, but that socioeconomic factors are probably more significant. (LB)

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Unmarried Mothers: Some Questions To Be Answered and Some Answers To Be Questioned

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Two of the main needs in research and practice related to unmarried mothers are: to learn some of the things we have not yet discovered and to unlearn some we mistakenly think we know. The double need applies to statistical facts and to theoretical formulations, and this article considers both in the light of available research evidence.

ELIZABETH HERZOG

When people talk about *the* problem of unmarried mothers or *the* problem of births out of wedlock, it is often like the old story of the blind men and the elephant—each has hold of a different part and seems to be describing a different animal. The reference may be to the unmarried mothers themselves, or a particular group of them—teenagers, say, or perhaps women with four or five out-of-wedlock children. Or the reference may be to the problems faced, the services needed, the tax burden caused by all these unworthy dependents, moral values or social conditions, or a number of other aspects.

I found myself trying to picture the problem as an elephant, with each part of him labeled for a different aspect. But I gave it up, because no elephant has enough parts. Any adequate portrait would have to include at least a herd of elephants, with their tusks and trunks all intertwined and tangled.

I have had occasion during the past year to interview a number of research people who are especially interested in problems relating to births out of wedlock. My remarks here are in effect a report on these discussions, plus a good deal of browsing in the literature. This is the kind of exercise sometimes referred to as a "survey of experts."

For convenience I will refer to these experts as my respondents. Some of them I have interviewed at considerable length, with discussion back and forth about what we know, what we need to know, and what we thought we knew that turned out not to be so. Some I have merely read, gleaning their opinions on these same points from the printed page. Obviously, I have made my own selection of respondents, of points, and of opinions.

My respondents did not, nor shall I, make moral or ethical pronouncements. As research investigators, our responsibility is to analyze and to report, providing background for decisions and actions guided by values. Nevertheless, the attention given to the sub-

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ject—by researchers as well as by others—reflects the assumption that our illegitimacy rates pose serious problems, that reducing them would be good, and that failure to reduce them is bad.

Defining the Problem

My respondents were almost unanimously concerned about defining the problem. Are we concerned about illegitimate births? Are we concerned about extramarital conception? Or are we concerned about extramarital coitus? Let us be clear about it, they insist, because the ways of coping with these three different levels would be different and might, to some extent, be incompatible.

For purposes of this paper, we are talking about unmarried mothers and illegitimate births. I shall refer to them as unmarried mothers, even though a considerable number of illegitimate pregnancies occur during marriage, between marriages, and after marriage.

The survey of experts brought out three main questions that serious researchers would most like to have answered—three questions, each of which trails a host of others. These three are:

1. How big is the problem?
2. Who are the unmarried mothers?
3. What factors contribute to, or are associated with, births out of wedlock?

I will try to indicate under each question some of the reasons they thought we should learn more about it.

Question One: How Big Is the Problem?

The first question can be studied from two viewpoints: How big is the problem in absolute numbers and how big is it relative to other numbers? Our galloping publicity makes us more familiar with the absolute than with the relative picture. We are constantly being reminded that the number of births out of wedlock has risen radically. In the twenty years between 1938 and 1958 it has more than doubled—from less than 100,000 to more than 200,000 (see Chart I).[1, 2] And if we look at birth rates rather than the absolute numbers, the increase is even more striking.[3]

How we perceive a problem and its causes strongly conditions what we are able and willing to do about it. The nature of our perception of this one is suggested by the frequency with which we hear reference to the "alarming" rise of births out of wedlock. A number of my respondents asked, "How alarming is the rise?" They did not doubt that the rate had gone up, but they did suggest that if it could be seen in context, perhaps it could be viewed without alarm. This would be so salutary, both for our peace of mind and for our unmarried mothers, that it seems worth considering.

Those who dwell on the alarming aspect of the increase sometimes forget that it is part of an over-all increase in the total number of live births and also in the birth rates. These rates, in turn, reflect changes in the number of women of childbearing age, in their age distribution, and in changes in marriage rates and in average family size.

BIRTHS OUT OF WEDLOCK TO WHITE AND NONWHITE MOTHERS IN THE CONTINENTAL UNITED STATES, 1938–1958

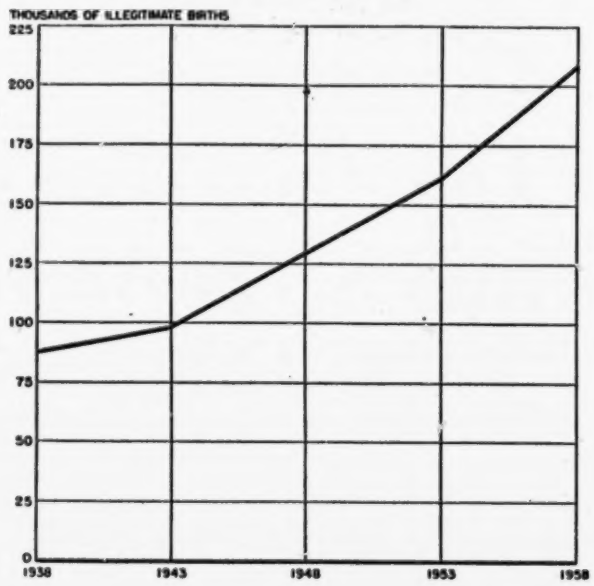

CHART I

Source: Bureau of Public Assistance, *Illegitimacy and Its Impact on the Aid to Dependent Children Program, 1960.*

[1] No figures later than 1960 were available, and some go back to 1957. Unless otherwise specified, figures quoted are from the Bureau of the Census or the National Office of Vital Statistics.

[2] We are much indebted to Mr. Francis McCarthy of the Friends Neighborhood Guild, who produced the charts for us, and to the Friends Neighborhood Guild for making his services available.

[3] By rates is meant the number of births out of wedlock per 1000 unmarried women of childbearing age.

Marriage rates and family size, in their turn, respond to economic conditions, war and peace, and perhaps other more elusive influences.

If we look at illegitimate births as part of all live births, we see them in a context of general increase. Chart II shows the increase in all live births, with the black segment at the bottom showing the increase in births out of wedlock. The rate of increase among illegitimate births has been a little faster than the over-all rate. In 1958 out-of-wedlock births represent about one percentage point more than in 1938, as a proportion of all live births. How much of this increase is real and how much is merely apparent is a moot question. But one point to be recognized for the moment is that the main increase is part of a total picture. It is not that suddenly and erratically illegitimate births have shot up, and that this is an isolated phenomenon to be dealt with as a crisis. It is rather that gradually, over a considerable period, births out of wedlock have shown the same tendency to increase that characterizes all births. We are trying to cope, not with a crisis, but with a long-term trend.

There are, of course, disagreements about interpreting the togetherness of birth rates in and out of wedlock. People ask, why *should* the two rates stay neck and neck? Why should the things that make total births go up also affect illegitimate births? The question is not unreasonable. Nevertheless, a gradual increase in these rates, which is of a piece with rates for all live births, is a different phenomenon from a sudden spurt that represents a *departure* from the rates for other live births. It seems more accurate to view it as part of an over-all picture and then to consider how we can *make* it diverge from the over-all trend rather than to view it out of context as a lonely and somewhat monstrous phenomenon. What forces cause the rise or fall in all birth rates is a grand and challenging question, beyond the scope of our present discussion.

Another point to be recognized is that the problems arising from births out of wedlock are not due to the increase. They are due to the phenomenon itself, which has been with us for a long time, and of which the increase per se is only a fraction. Had

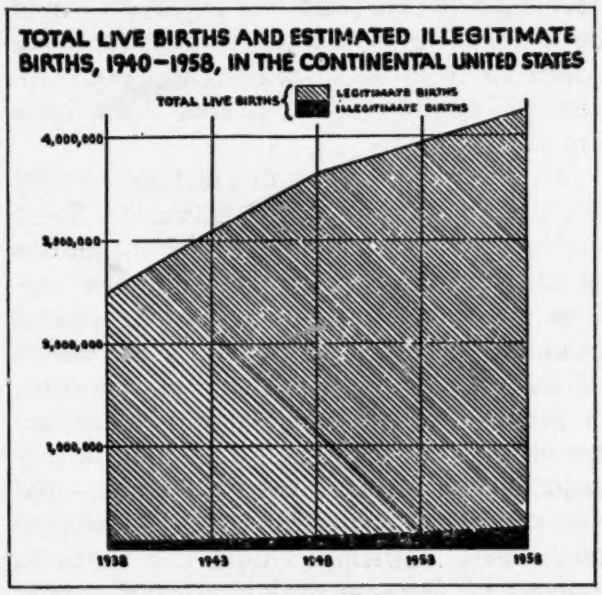

CHART II

Source: Bureau of Public Assistance, *Illegitimacy and Its Impact on the Aid to Dependent Children Program, 1960.*

the births out of wedlock not gained on the births in wedlock, the top of the black segment (on the right side of the chart, 1958) would be just a little lower than it is. The problem, however, would still be with us, and probably we would still be writing about it. The appropriate focus of attention, then, is not the sliver that represents the increase, but the segment that represents continuity rather than crisis.

This point seems worthy of consideration because the crisis view invites reactions of fear and hostility. Not only are these emotions destructive in themselves, but they often constitute blocks to communication and problem-solving.

One point a good deal more prominent in the minds of my respondents than in the daily press is that our national figures on births out of wedlock are estimates, based on reports from thirty-five states. The tendency to forget this is no fault of the National Vital Statistics Division (more familiar under its former name, National Office of Vital Statistics). In addition to performing a remarkable job of reporting and analysis, this office continuously supplies us with model statements of limitation. If every news story about statistics on unmarried mothers carried one of these excellent paragraphs at its head, probably—well, prob-

ably—they would sell fewer papers. It would be well, however, for those of us who are concerned with understanding this explosive complex of problems to ponder these limiting statements.[4]

My respondents were not inclined to view the present figures as overestimates. Some of them, however, question the magnitude of the reported *increase* in rates. The reasons are probably familiar. Despite careful estimates we are not sure about the effects of the constant improvement in reporting. It seems possible that accurate allowance for changes in reporting would substantially reduce—and perhaps even eliminate—that one percentage point by which illegitimate births have outstripped total live births in amount of *increase* during the last twenty years.

This, of course, would not reduce the current illegitimacy rate. It would merely put the rate in line with the picture of total live births, or perhaps show it increasing at a slower pace. Thus, the rate of increase would be converted from an alarming rise to a more gradual and therefore presumably less alarming one.

Doubts about the rise have been with us for a long time. About seventy years ago a study of illegitimate briths in Massachusetts reported a gradual increase in rates of illegitimacy over the preceding forty years, but warned that the increase might be more apparent than real and might, in fact, be due to improvements in reporting.

The crisis view of our subject is often associated with reminders that the number of teenage unmarried mothers has increased greatly, that they represent 40 percent of all unmarried mothers, and that this is the largest proportion for any age group. All three statements are true, as Chart III shows. Here we see that, in 1959, 40 percent of the unmarried mothers were under twenty—the largest proportion for any five-year age span.

It is also true, for many reasons, that perhaps we need to be more concerned about the teenage unmarried mother than about any other, no matter what proportion of the whole she represents. That proportion, however, is not in itself the reason for concern. To view it without alarm might help to view it without hostility—which, in turn, might help communication and understanding between generations.

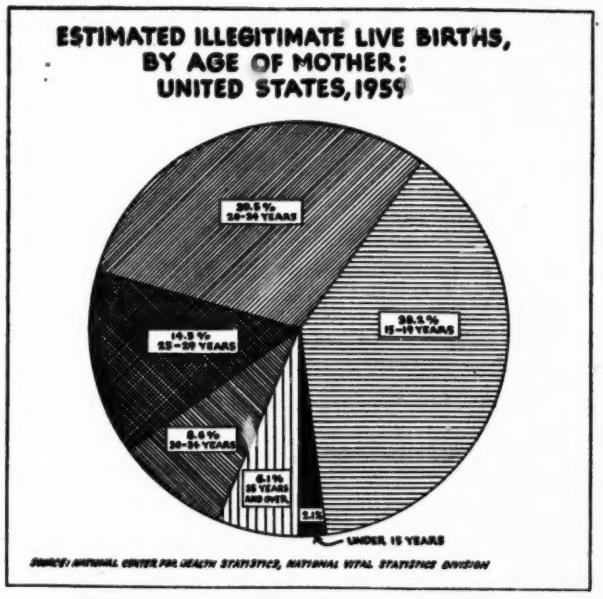

CHART III

The Teenage Unmarried Mother

Four points help to put in perspective the teenage unmarried mother as a statistic. One is that the majority of unmarried mothers are *not* teenagers (see Chart IV). If we look only at those below twenty and those above twenty, the configuration is rather different from that presented by Chart III. The so-called "older mothers"—that is, those above twenty—account for 60 percent, as compared with 40 percent for the teenagers. It might perhaps be added that in 1938 the proportion was not 40 percent, but 48 percent. In other words, the teenager accounts, not for a larger, but for a smaller proportion of the unmarried mothers than before.

A second point for perspective is that, although teenagers do not constitute a majority of unmarried mothers, they do constitute a majority of unmarried women of childbearing age. Chart IV shows that in 1960 teenagers represented 68 percent of our unmarried female population of childbearing age, while unmarried women between twenty and forty-four represented 32

[4] *Illegitimate Births: Fact Sheet* (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Public Health Service, National Office of Vital Statistics, April 15, 1960).

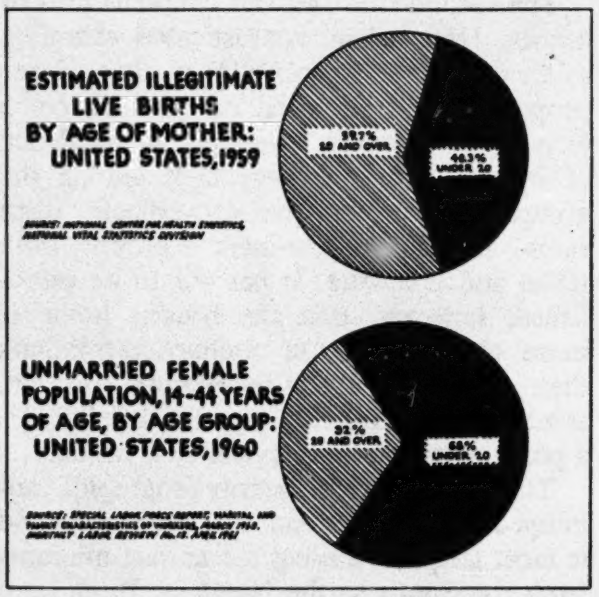
ESTIMATED ILLEGITIMATE LIVE BIRTHS BY AGE OF MOTHER: UNITED STATES, 1959
UNMARRIED FEMALE POPULATION, 14-44 YEARS OF AGE, BY AGE GROUP: UNITED STATES, 1960
32%
68%

CHART IV

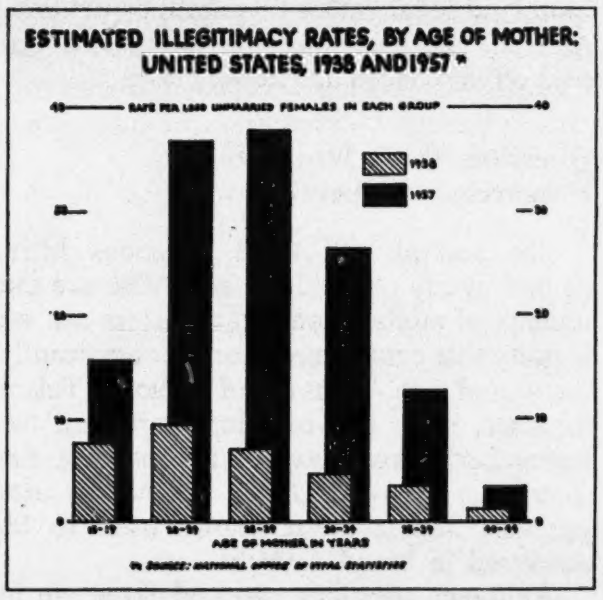

CHART V

percent.[5] Thus, the teenager—as she surely should be—is underrepresented in the population of unmarried mothers. Not as much underrepresented as we would like to see her, and as we should surely try to make her. But the implications of the frequently quoted figure seem unfair.

A third point for perspective is that, although rates of illegitimate births have increased since 1938 for all women of childbearing age, they have increased least of all for the teenager. Chart V shows the increases between 1938 and 1957 for each age group. These increases, it should be repeated, represent rates rather than numbers—that is, they show the number of children born out of wedlock per 1000 unmarried women of childbearing age. In 1938, the rate for teenagers was higher than for any age group except those twenty to twenty-four years old. According to our latest figures, however, the rate among teenagers is lower than for any age group under thirty-five.

My last point for perspective is perhaps the most important of the four. This is that in the last few years for which we have figures—1956 to 1958—the teenager represents the one age group that has shown *no* increase in rates of illegitimate births. It is hard to understand why this fact is so underplayed in the midst of viewing with alarm. If we accept the national estimates at all, why do we keep saying the number of births to teenage unmarried mothers has increased by so many thousands, and never add—but in the last few years, the rates have not increased? Actually since 1947 the rate for girls fourteen and under has been constant.[6]

I have never seen a headline to this effect. I have hardly seen a mention of it in a news story. What I do see is highlighting of the high number of illegitimate births for every 1000 live births to girls under seventeen; and this figure is usually quoted with no reference to the fact that—despite our decreasing age at marriage—relatively few girls under seventeen are childbearing wives, so that mothers under seventeen are likely to be unmarried.

When I ask why we are so bent on emphasizing this particular negative, I am usually told that the only way to get people to do something is to rouse them up into a panic. This view has its points, but it also has its weaknesses. Certainly soothing syrup is not generally recommended as a stimulant, but neither are panic and hostility recommended as the best recipe for problem-solving. These problems are serious enough to

[5] In Chart IV it was necessary to combine figures for 1959 and 1960. There was not enough change between those two years, however, to affect our picture appreciably.

[6] Joseph Schachter and Mary McCarthy, *Illegitimate Births: United States, 1938–57* (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Public Health Service, National Office of Vital Statistics, 1960), Table F, p. 231.

command sober rather than frantic attention. And so far, panicking the public has not paid off in reduced illegitimacy rates.

Question Two: Who Are the Unmarried Mothers?

The second and third questions highlighted by my respondents are: Who are the unmarried mothers; and what factors can we identify that contribute to, or are significantly associated with, births out of wedlock? Taken together, these two questions represent the researcher's cagey way of approaching the question, *why*—which he knows by experience almost never allows itself to be answered in broad daylight.

Although questions two and three are in essence inseparable, I shall separate them. Separating the inseparable is, of course, one of the research habits found so irritating by practitioners. But discussion, like research, often requires pulling things apart in order to see how they fit together. Accordingly, under each one separately I will mention a few points on which some familiar answers are being qualified or challenged.

Describing Unmarried Mothers

Who are the unmarried mothers? Four familiar answers have influenced assumptions about who they are.

The first of these concerns mentality. Time was when it was commonly said that low intelligence was significantly related to unmarried motherhood. Perhaps there has been a real change in this correlation. Or perhaps we have become more alert to the limitations of certain intelligence tests for people not proficient in the language or the mores. Or perhaps we are more alert to sampling problems. A study of the twenties, for instance, described the unmarried mothers who had been sent to a psychiatric clinic for testing as representative of those known to social agencies—apparently without considering that the very reasons for wanting them tested might constitute a difference between them and the others. In any case, recent studies do not encourage an assumption that inferior intelligence is especially associated with, and may contribute to, unmarried motherhood.

The second stock answer concerns broken homes. Here again, sophisticated sampling raises doubts. It is probably true that a large proportion of unmarried mothers do come from broken homes. However, the incidence of broken homes is very high among the groups with high out-of-wedlock birth rates—that is, the low-income groups, both white and nonwhite. It has yet to be established, however, that the broken home is more characteristic of unmarried mothers than of other women in these groups. In fact, some studies explicitly absolve it.[7] This is a point on which more evidence is needed.

The third answer concerns geographic mobility. It is often said that unwed motherhood is most frequent among the newest migrants from the South to the North or from rural to urban environment. The explanations offered are persuasive. A few recent studies, however, show less illegitimacy among very recent arrivals than among those who have been longer exposed to urban influences.[8] Until this point is resolved, one can no longer with any comfort put the onus on the newcomer.

The fourth familiar answer is often the only one given to the question: Who are the unmarried mothers? The terms used vary among emotional disturbance, psychological disturbance, disturbed parent-daughter relations—usually mother-daughter. Most frequently this answer involves the assumption that out-of-wedlock pregnancy is the unmarried mother's solution to her intra- and interpersonal problems, that her pregnancy is not accidental but quasi-deliberate, and that her personality and problems conform to a regularly recurring—in fact almost invariable—pattern. Often there is a lip-service recognition that unmarried mothers are not all psychological identical twins. Yet a doctoral dissertation published as late as 1958 can declare roundly that all unmarried mothers show the same traits and have become pregnant through the same psychological mechanism; and a serious article dated 1956 can de-

[7] F. Ivan Nye, "Child Adjustment in Broken and in Unhappy Unbroken Homes," *Marriage and Family Living*, XIX (1957), 356–361; and Virginia Wimperis, *The Unmarried Mother and Her Child* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1960).

[8] Jane Collier Kronick, "An Assessment of Research Knowledge Concerning the Unmarried Mother," *Research Perspectives on the Unmarried Mother* (New York: CWLA, 1962).

clare that pregnancy out of wedlock is never really accidental and that these girls can become pregnant almost at will—even though failure to use contraception may help a little.

A root of conflict in testimony about who the unmarried mothers are seems to be that, through the years, the most available subjects for study have been the clients of social agencies, and generalizations about *the* unmarried mother have typically reflected the characteristics of agency or clinic clientele.

The evidence supports at least one unqualified statement. So far no single trait or condition—physical, intellectual, or emotional—stands up as *the* overwhelming constant characterizing *the* unmarried mother—except, of course, bearing a child out of wedlock. Nor is there convincing evidence that, among those who do suffer from emotional and interpersonal disturbances, one pattern is overwhelmingly preponderant. To those whose business is the assessment of evidence, it is surprising that statements as sweeping as the one cited can still be made.

Clark Vincent is the investigator who in recent years has most emphatically and convincingly pointed out the distortions in our notions of who the unmarried mothers are, and some of the consequences of these distortions. When he presented evidence that some unmarried mothers are relatively mature, upstanding, and economically self-sufficient, he added an essential and long-lost piece to our picture—a piece consistent with the neglected message of our national statistics. The results of his studies, and of his thinking about them, are brought together in his recent book, *Unmarried Mothers,* which offers our field something like a shot of iron and vitamins.[9] He asked a simple question: Who are the *other* unmarried mothers—the ones who do not form our captive populations for study, in agencies and on relief rolls; the ones who are over twenty and supplied with cash and able to leave home to bear their out-of-wedlock children, whom they then place—all secretly and without benefit of agency? This question he proceeded to begin answering, and in doing so he began sketching in the lines of a more balanced and realistic picture than had been accepted before.

[9] Clark E. Vincent, *Unmarried Mothers* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1961).

The neglected group he added to our ken represents a minority of unmarried mothers, but an important one. They are white girls and women, chiefly of the middle- and upper-income levels. It is generally conceded that the great majority of unmarried mothers come from low-income brackets. We do not know exactly how large a proportion, but my respondents agree that we would do well to find out.

We do know how large a proportion are nonwhite, according to the national estimates. The overrepresentation of nonwhites among births out of wedlock is a familiar theme. Moreover, our national figures show the rates for nonwhites increasing more than the rates for whites.[10]

Sources of Difference

Some of my respondents voiced skepticism about the size of the differences between illegitimate birth rates for whites and for nonwhites—differences in present rates and also differences in the rate of increase. Almost no one doubted the existence of a difference. Several suspected, however, that if relevant factors could be controlled, the difference in rate at a given time would be radically reduced and the difference in amount of increase might be wiped out.

The difference in amount of increase has undoubtedly been affected by improved reporting of all births, an improvement far greater for nonwhites than for whites, as estimated by the National Office of Vital Statistics.[11] Thus, a considerable portion of the apparent nonwhite increase does seem attributable to improved reporting.

An unknown element in reported difference is represented by the fact that the states which do not report illegitimacy are the very ones to which white unwed mothers are most likely to travel, in order to give birth secretly and place the child in adoption, with the illegitimacy reported neither in the state of birth nor in the mother's state of residence.

[10] Nonwhite is the classification used in our national figures. About 92 percent of the nonwhite population is Negro.

[11] *Vital Statistics of the United States, 1959* (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Public Health Service, National Office of Vital Statistics, 1961), Section 3, Natality Statistics, Table 3-D.

These states include, among others, New York, California, and Massachusetts.

One source of real disparity between white and nonwhite rates is that the over-all rate is higher for nonwhite births than for white births, and has increased more—as shown in Chart VI. We see both higher rates and a steeper climb on the nonwhite side—again a picture paralleled in the out-of-wedlock births.

Another source of real difference between white and nonwhite rates is socioeconomic status. We have no national figures directly relating unmarried motherhood to social-economic level. One of the few unchallenged statements that can be made on this subject, however, is that the overwhelming majority of reported births out of wedlock are to mothers on the low-income levels. A recent study in New York City, for example, estimated that less than one in twenty of the illegitimate births during the study period occurred to private patients.[12]

The extent to which births out of wedlock are concentrated in the lower economic levels has been computed by a sociologist, drawing on the data of the Kinsey group and some other investigators. According to his computation, out of 100 middle- or upper-class white girls who have premarital coitus, one will have an illegitimate child; while out 100 lower-class Negro girls who follow this course, seventeen will bear children.[13]

This proportion is in large measure a result of the fact that, according to available evidence, fewer middle- and upper-class white girls will conceive because most of those who have coitus will use contraception; and fewer who conceive will bear children because 90 percent will have abortions, as compared with 30 percent of the low-income Negro girls.[14]

There is ample evidence that contraception is disliked and feared by lower-class whites as well as by lower-class Negroes, and

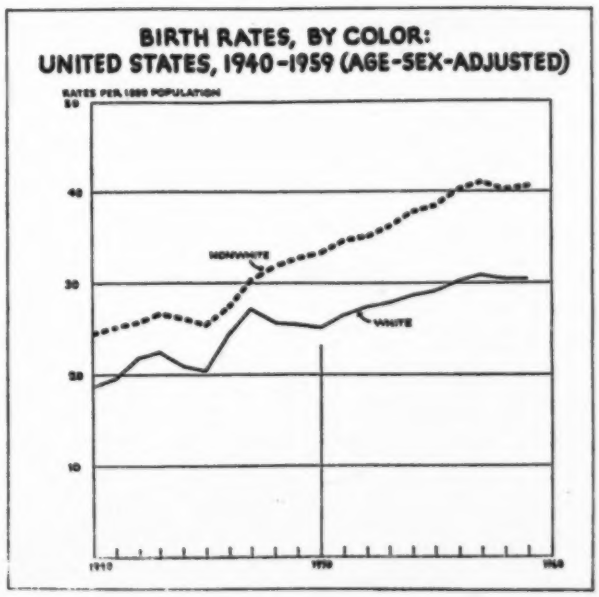

CHART VI

Source: National Office of Vital Statistics, *Vital Statistics of the United States, 1959*, Section 3, Natality Statistics, Table 3–E, 1961.

far more by males than by females. Many find abortion too expensive or too frightening, and to many it is so unthinkable that they do not reach the stage of fear.

If the small segment of unmarried mothers above the lower socioeconomic level were deducted, it would be appropriate to base the rates only on the low-income population. But that part of the population represents a much larger fraction of the whole for the nonwhites than for the whites, as Chart VII shows. These figures present income for families rather than for individuals. The message is familiar, but sometimes a picture of what we know makes it more vivid. The peak of nonwhite family income is between $1000 and $2000 per year. The largest proportion of white families fall between $5000 and $6000. If we arbitrarily accept $3000 as our cutting point, almost one-half of the nonwhite population falls below it, as compared with not quite one-fifth of the white. If we cut at $1500, 24 percent of the nonwhite and 7 percent of the white family incomes fall below it—over three to one. If our rates of illegitimacy could be figured against the base that produces most births out of wedlock, that base would include a much smaller proportion of whites than of nonwhites, and the difference in rates would be reduced by a sharp rise in the white rates.

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12 Jean Pakter, Henry J. Rosner, Harold Jacobziner, and Frieda Greenstein, "Out-of-Wedlock Births in New York City: I—Sociological Aspects," *American Journal of Public Health*, LI (1961), 683–697; "II—Medical Aspects," *American Journal of Public Health*, LI (1961), 846–865.

13 Howard Stanton, unpublished manuscript.

14 H. Paul Gebhard, Wardell B. Pomeroy, Clyde E. Martin, and Cornelia V. Christenson, *Pregnancy, Birth and Abortion* (New York: Harper & Bros. and Paul B. Hoeber, Inc., 1958).

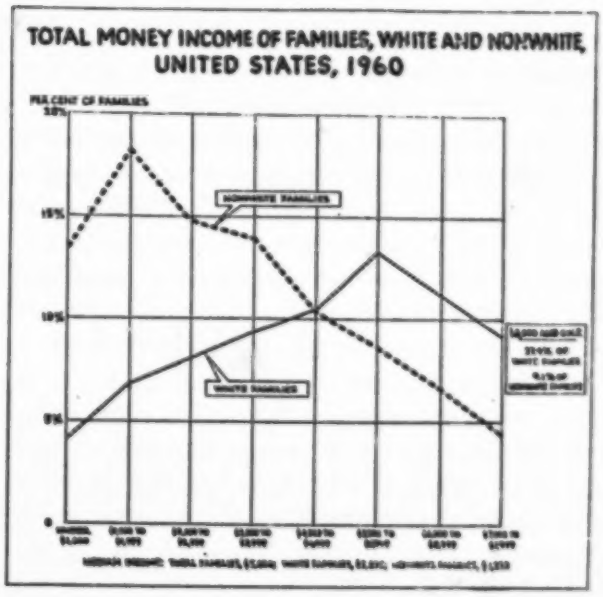

CHART VII

Source: Bureau of the Census, Series P–60, No. 36, 1961.

Question Three: What Factors Are Associated with Births Out of Wedlock?

Our first two questions concerned my respondents' urge to check assumptions about the dimensions of a problem and the identity of those most involved. Question three concerns their wish to check assumptions about factors contributing to, or associated with, unmarried motherhood. The main challenges to widely accepted ideas cluster about those two iffy factors, cultural background (specifically the Negro-white distinction) and socioeconomic status. These are, quite reasonably, the two factors whose contributions to parenthood out of wedlock my respondents would most like to understand better. They would like to be more clear about the relative and absolute importance of each one, about their manifestations, their interaction, and their shifts through time. These factors have been studied a good deal and are still being studied, in connection with our present subject and with several others. And it seems clear that some often-heard statements and assumptions about them require modification in the light of available evidence.

A frequent feature of such statements is their absolute quality. When historical and cultural factors began to be mentioned as throwing light on current behavior, it was by way of counteracting stereotypes. An effort was made to introduce additional considerations that might help to explain behavior in all its complexity. But these additional considerations have somehow become new means to oversimplification. A pat phrase—"it's the culture"—is used, not to help explain, but to brush aside the need for explanation. And so in its turn the culture reference becomes a sort of neostereotype that blurs rather than sharpens our picture.

This rubber-stamp substitute for thought fails to do justice to the complexities of culture itself. Among those who have been most explicit in reminding about and illustrating these complexities are John Rohrer and his co-author.[15] I recommend their discussion as an antidote to the oversimplifications I perpetrate here.

I have said that the two factors—or factor complexes—most compelling to my respondents are the cultural and the socioeconomic. In our society, however, the culture constellation of each individual is vastly affected by his social-economic position. The interest of my respondents in the relation of this position to unwed motherhood is largely, in fact, an interest in the "culture of poverty." [16]

Under question three I shall concentrate on cultural influences—ethnic or socioeconomic—partly because they cover so many facets and partly because they represent the outstanding interest of my respondents. And I shall comment on only two of the several statements and assumptions they challenged or qualified.

1. High on the list comes the slavery-specific culture thesis: that is, the proposition that illegitimacy rates among low-income Negroes derive primarily from a "Negro culture" produced by the situation under slavery. One difficulty with this proposition is that slavery is a hundred years behind us—crowded years, during which many influences have affected the family life and sex patterns of us all. Another is that some characteristics lumped under the slavery-legacy label are

[15] John H. Rohrer and Munro S. Edmonson, *The Eighth Generation* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1960).

[16] Oscar Lewis, "The Culture of Poverty," presented at the National Conference on Social Welfare, Minneapolis, Minn., 1961; and Thomas Gladwin, "The Anthropologist's View of Poverty," *The Social Welfare Forum* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1961).

characteristically found also among low-income whites.

This convergence is the less surprising when we consider that much of what is ascribed to the culture of slavery is—and always was— inherent in the culture of poverty. If Negroes had not been slaves in a plantation setting but had been in as depressed an economic situation as the majority of them have been during and since slavery, the behavior of the low-income segment would probably show some of the elements now ascribed to slavery.

In discussing the culture of poverty, the grinding elements of physical insecurity and deprivation are occasionally neglected—though not by those who have actually lived among the very poor. Aside from these, a characteristic often noted in reports on the culture of poverty is lack of command over one's own destiny. The poor, be they deserving or undeserving, are on the whole more at the mercy of circumstances they cannot control than are the rich. This fact is frequently linked to a short, rather than a long, time perspective. If you feel—and to a considerable extent are—the pawn of circumstance, there is little inducement to planfulness and future orientation. You make the best you can of the moment. This lack of autonomy is at least as native to slavery as to poverty.

Associated with a tendency to present rather than future orientation, in reports on the culture of poverty, are a high degree of family disorganization and a lack of commitment to the norms and values accepted by the great society. I do not wish to belabor or even to explore the point here. I will merely report that a number of my respondents think the influence of ethnic identification has been overemphasized and that of social-economic status has been underemphasized. This is not to deny that both exist.

The habit of analyzing data by color rather than by income level has helped to support the slavery-specific thesis. Since a much larger proportion of Negroes than of whites are on the lowest income levels, what look like statistically significant differences between Negroes and whites may also look like significant differences between different social-economic levels. But if the figures are presented only in one way, we don't find out about the other.

A few studies have done it both ways, with illuminating results. Clark Vincent, for example, found differences both by class and by race in the way unmarried mothers described their relationships with the putative father—whether love, friendship, or (much less often than is commonly assumed) a casual and transitory relation. The income level appeared to be the stronger in this study, but the color influence did not by any means disappear.[17] This may mean that both are significant, and I know of few investigators who would deny that both are, although a good many consider income level the more important—as it appears to be in Vincent's data and in some other studies.[18]

At the same time, almost no study of unmarried mothers so far has succeeded in an adequate breakdown by income level. There is sometimes a tendency to assume that the low-income level is homogeneous. Yet it has its own layers, and a much larger proportion of Negroes than of whites occupy the lower ones. A number of investigators have succeeded in documenting—though not in exploring fully—the existence of these layers within layers, as well as their crucial significance.[19]

Current evidence, then, indicates that neither a Negro culture nor an income level can be used as a tag to wipe away the need for looking closer. The label alone will never tell what we need to know about just which elements derive from each, how they manifest themselves, and how they interact.

2. A corollary of the slavery cliché is the often-heard statement that no stigma attaches to illegitimacy among low-income Negroes. This statement usually carries the implication that no stigma means no penalty and that this means it doesn't matter whether one is born in or out of wedlock. Here is the catch. The evidence does indicate that the social stigma for the low-income Negro is nothing like that suffered by the middle-

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17 Vincent, *op. cit.*

18 Henry J. Meyer, Wyatt Jones, and Edgar F. Borgatta, "The Decision by Unmarried Mothers To Keep or Surrender Their Baby," *Social Work*, I, No. 2 (1956), 103–109; and Henry J. Meyer, Edgar F. Borgatta, and David Fanshel, "Unwed Mothers' Decisions About Their Babies," CHILD WELFARE, XXXVIII, No. 2 (1959), 1–6.

19 See, for example, Gebhard, *et al.*, *op. cit.*

or high-income Negro or white person. But to be born in wedlock and to have your children born in wedlock is a decided social plus, and a gratification; and if it is part of a stable marriage, it can be a tremendous source of emotional support and pride. An interviewer in a Chicago study told about the unwed mother of several children who kept in the honor place of her room a large picture of her sister in full wedding regalia. She quickly made an opportunity to call attention to the picture, with the greatest pride and gratification, as if her relationship to a regularly married woman was a status symbol worth displaying.

Apparently the plus value of regular marriage is stronger in some circles than the minus value of no marriage. There is an old Yiddish proverb that says: Money is not so good as the lack of money is bad. Here one might say: Lack of marriage is not so bad as having a marriage is good.

Yet the lack is by no means a matter of indifference. Some low-income mothers pray for boys in order to avoid "trouble" for their daughters, and when trouble comes there is grief and anger, even though there is also the strong conviction that you stick to your own, take care of your own, never turn them away. There is also a revulsion against forcing a marriage between a girl pregnant out of wedlock and the putative father, unless they really love each other. Apparently the stigma is not enough to make an unhappy marriage more desirable than an out-of-wedlock birth. On the contrary, a girl may take pride in waiting until she is "sure she loves him"—even though this assurance comes after the baby is born. (Some of these contrasts between high- and low-income attitudes toward marriage offer interesting food for speculation about the function of marriage for different groups.)

Our purpose here is to note what is challenged, and on what grounds, rather than to provide the intricate answers required. Some answers are available, however, and some are being supplied or reinforced by studies already published or still in process. Among the latter, the study of low-income families in the District of Columbia, directed by Hylan Lewis, is one source of challenge to easy generalizations and of information to fill the gaps left when they topple.[20] For me it is a major source, on which I am drawing heavily right now.

Among the complex of reasons for the distortion implicit in the stigma cliché, one is a prevailing assumption that people have a single, consistent set of values, directly mirrored in their daily lives. Most of us know this is not necessarily so. In relation to illegitimacy, we have abundant evidence that prevailing middle-class norms may represent an approved pattern, but one considered unattainable by people who comfortably continue to act as if those norms did not exist. "Beggars can't be choosers," is the way one unwed mother put it. The existence of a dual set of values must be recognized in order to make sense. One observer comments that "the lower class subscribes to the general values of the society and also has values unique to itself. . . ." ". . . legal marriage and a non-legal union . . . are two types of acceptable marital patterns. . . . This is not to say that these two patterns are equally valued." [21] A realistic picture of the relation between value preference and actual behavior must recognize both the acceptability of patterns that violate middle-class norms and the higher values put on those norms.

Efforts To Bring About Change

My respondents did not spell out the bearing of their questions and challenges on reduction of illegitimacy problems, although several implications are clear. The main one, I think, is the advantage of improving our information on the challenged points—especially our information about the culture of the groups that provide most of our unmarried mothers. For experience has shown that in order to change a culture one should know it. And anyone who wants to reduce problems relating to births out of wedlock wants to introduce cultural changes—whether the clulture involved is the culture of poverty, the culture of nonwhite groups,

[20] Hylan Lewis, "Child-Rearing Practices Among Low-Income Families," *Casework Papers, 1961* (New York: Family Service Association of America, 1961), pp. 79–92.

[21] Hyman Rodman, "On Understanding Lower-Class Behavior," *Social and Economic Studies*, VIII (1959), 441–450. See also William J. Goode, "Illegitimacy in the Caribbean Social Structure," *American Sociological Review*, XXV (1960), 21–30.

or the culture of youth—which I have deliberately omitted here. Although full comprehension of the culture to be modified may not guarantee ability to bring about change, miscomprehension will probably guarantee inability to do so.

"Know the culture" is the first of five axioms often invoked by those experienced in effective introduction of culture change—axioms which are perhaps a collective equivalent of some casework axioms. The second axiom is: "Know what change you want to bring about, and how." The third is: "Instill motivation for change." A good many investigators, these days, link the behavior patterns of low-income levels to current theories of anomie and opportunity structure discussed by Merton, Ohlin, Cloward, and others.[22] If an individual feels he is not part of the great society, they say, if he feels that the avenues to its rewards are blocked, then he is unlikely to live by the rules of that society. Some part of him may prefer the rules accepted by those whom the society accepts. But if the goals do not seem accessible to him, he is not motivated to exercise the self-discipline and energy inspired by belief that something is to be gained—or even just that he belongs.

A number of current studies are testing out different facets of this theory in different ways. If it stands up, practical realism would favor trying to apply it. For, unlike some, it concerns a part of the environment that we are able to manipulate.

The fourth axiom is: "Show that change is feasible by giving a taste of success." This is a principle effective in underdeveloped countries, in helping school children catch up with their classmates, and also in work with so-called multi-problem families, among whose multi-problems is illegitimacy. If, in the beginning, tasks and projects are within the grasp of the performer, so that he can believe success is possible and taste its gratifications and results, the mainspring for motivation to further effort has been achieved.

The fifth axiom is: "We must want change enough to be willing to pay for it—in whatever currency and amount may be required." This, people are seldom prepared to do.

We have been trying over and over things that do *not* detach the illegitimacy rates from the total birth rates and bend them downward. One thing we have tried is exhortation, a method in vogue since Biblical days. Another is depriving the deprived, and still another is putting a cash premium on fatherless homes. It seems reasonable to sift the evidence for leads to more promising approaches.

Summary

I have mentioned a number of points in an effort to make only a few. What I have been trying to say can be summed up under three statements:

1. Seen in context, the rise in illegitimacy rates is substantial but not alarming, merits concern rather than panic or rage, and can be coped with best if viewed without alarm.
2. The behavior patterns responsible for most out-of-wedlock births are related both to the culture of poverty and to the culture of an ethnic group, but the socioeconomic factors are probably more significant.
3. If we want to bring about change we must be clear about what we want to change from and what we want to change to, we must demonstrate the value and the feasibility of change to those whose behavior we want to modify, and we ourselves must want it enough to put in what it takes.

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22 See, for example: Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure: Toward the Codification of Theory and Research* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1951); and Richard Cloward and Lloyd E. Ohlin, *Delinquency and Opportunity* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1960).

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